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BOOK REVIEW

Rock Journalism's Noisy Bad Boy

Biography of larger-than-life critic Lester Bangs is a fan letter in disguise

LET IT BLURT
The Life and Times of Lester Bangs, America's Greatest Rock Critic
By Jim DeRogatis
Broadway, 331 pages, $15.95

Reviewed by Neva Chonin

Documenting a paradox can be a sticky matter when its contradictions are contagious. Take the case of biographer Jim DeRogatis, who launches his biography of the late rock critic Lester Bangs with a quote from his ornery subject:

"I believe that rock 'n' roll comes down to myth," Bangs writes. "There are no 'facts.' " DeRogatis takes exception to this, noting that "sometimes Lester was full of s--. Of course there are facts in rock 'n' roll . . ." He goes on to declare Bangs "the great gonzo journalist, gutter poet, and romantic visionary of rock writing -- its Hunter S. Thompson, Charles Bukowski, and Jack Kerouac all rolled into one."

Which, of course, are just the kinds of mythic, mutable facts that Bangs was referring to -- ones whose veracity rests on the belief that they must be true because they feel too right not to be. Such truths fueled this canonized writer's cathartic essays, and they fuel this meticulously researched and unabashedly romantic chronicle of his life. DeRogatis is as much a myth-loving fan as the rest of us, and beneath his studied prose he writes like one.

DeRogatis, pop music critic for the Chicago Sun-Times, seems aware of this. He does, after all, give "Let It Blurt" a title as subtle as a carny barker's call. But for all his own contradictions, he avoids the usual pitfalls that come with writing about a great stylist and personal hero. Many aficionados have a tendency -- conscious or not -- to simulate their subjects' distinctive art; DeRogatis instead sticks to a transparent prose,

From "Let It Blurt"

Bruce Springsteen and Lester Bangs in 1975

creating a muted canvas on which excerpts of Bangs' incandescently rabid language can freely splatter and shine.

Probably this is second nature. DeRogatis is a contemporary journalist whose restrained efficiency is the antithesis of Bangs' inspired hyperbole. The rock criticism of the early '70s is as alien to today's career music critics as it was to the scribes who preceded it. He may still be canonical to aspiring writers, but "the great gonzo journalist" would never find a job in today's buttoned-down rock industry. "Let It Blurt" painstakingly shows that he could barely find work in his own time -- this even though his writing so reflects its epoch that reading it now prompts flashbacks bordering on the hallucinatory.

DeRogatis writes with more than a hint of nostalgia -- the type of nostalgia that comes of longing for a time one was too young to experience firsthand -- and "Let It Blurt" aspires to transcend biography and "examine the music and culture of the times through the prisms of Lester."

And for the most part it does, tracing the birth of rock criticism (a term Bangs loathed) through the founding squalls of Rolling Stone in 1967 and Creem in 1969 to the textual brawls among those magazines' diverse philosophers. While peaceable post-hippie literati such as Robert Christgau and Greil Marcus held forth from San Francisco and New York, Bangs and his "Noise Boys" -- Richard Meltzer, Nick Tosches, Dave Marsh -- covered the hard-rock front in Detroit. They were brats on a mission, championing the visceral honesty of the MC5, Iggy and the Stooges and the Velvet Underground over the culture of corporate mellow offered by the Eagles and the Steve Miller Band.

"Where pop icons used to represent an ideal you would like to be, most of them today represent various avenues of escape and the painful necessity of emotion that goes with it," Bangs wrote of mainstream rock for an unpublished book.

Bangs had an eye on his legacy from the moment he picked up his first Kerouac book as a teen and decided to emulate his hero's legendary excess. If he railed against celebrity, he aspired to be immortal.

A self-proclaimed hick, Bangs was born in 1948 in the Southern California town of El Cajon. His father was a loving alcoholic who burned to death at a young age; his mother was a Jehovah's Witness who took little Lester along on her door-to-door crusades. Bangs soaked it all up, growing into an acerbic wunderkind with a lousy school record and a passion for language. He harbored a lifelong fetish for the Beat poets and strove to emulate them on both personal and literary fronts. His passion extended to music when the arcane yet earthy sounds of Charles Mingus and, later, rock 'n' roll fueled an imagination already roiling from noxious combinations of Romilar cough syrup, vanilla extract and the ephedrine-soaked wicks of nasal decongestants. Bangs' taste in drugs, like his taste in music, was wholly idiosyncratic.

After launching his rock career with the nascent Rolling Stone, Bangs defected to the proto-punk Creem in 1970. There he wrote much of his most memorable work, from essayistic rants, willfully subjective features and stream-of-consciousness criticism. His brawls with stars are iconic in their intensity, epitomized by a feud with Lou Reed for which readers kept score like fervent World Cup fans. Moving to New York in the mid-'70s, Bangs became a leading scribe of the city's underground music scene, penning some of the earliest and most enthusiastic reviews for the Dictators, Patti Smith and the Ramones.

Through it all, he continued his dissipation at a dizzying pace. DeRogatis chronicles in dumbfounded -- and, as is natural, somewhat gleeful -- detail Bangs' inspired if occasionally asinine antics and gargantuan chemical abuse. The Lester saga is indeed as large as legend, filled with all-night debaucheries and monumental morning-after remorse. As loud in person as in print, he slouched in at over 6 feet tall, tipped the scales at a sloppy 200 pounds, and consumed enough rank drugs and alcohol to slay a man twice his size. He was frequently confrontational but flawlessly charming. He oozed lewd schoolkid sexuality but craved long-term relationships, of which he had several.

When he died in 1982 of what most believe was an overdose of the painkiller Darvon, Bangs closed the door on a school of criticism that spawned writers as luminously weird as the scene they covered. And it's DeRogatis' fanlike love for that lost school, more than his tidy research, that makes "Let It Blurt" shine. Creating a hero under the guise of criticism is something only a closeted Noise Boy would understand. ■

Read Chronicle writer Neva Chonin's online columns at www.sfgate.com/eguide/music/chonin.

The Truman-Dewey Battle Changed How We Pick Presidents

THE LAST CAMPAIGN
How Harry Truman Won the 1948 Election
By Zachary Karabell
Alfred A. Knopf, 320 pages, $27.50

Reviewed by Michael Lind

"At the dawn of the twenty-first century, we see a presidential politics dominated by two parties that split the center," Zachary Karabell writes in the introduction to "The Last Campaign: How Harry Truman Won the 1948 Election." To suggest just what we are missing in contemporary politics, Karabell has written an informative book about what may have been the last election in which American voters were presented with "a smorgasbord of options" -- the bitterly contested 1948 campaign.

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Our collective memories of that campaign are shaped by the famous photograph of Harry Truman holding up the Chicago Daily Tribune with its headline: "Dewey Defeats Truman." The theme of Truman-as-underdog is joined in American political mythology with a nostalgic portrait of Truman as a plain-speaking advocate of the little man, an image that owes a great deal to the hit 1970s play "Give 'Em Hell, Harry."

In retrospect, though, Truman looks remarkably like Lyndon Johnson. Both were small-town New Deal Democratic politicians who succeeded to the presidency on the death of their predecessor, won election one time on their own, and then withdrew rather than run for a second term, largely because of an unpopular, frustrating war in East Asia. Johnson, however, won in 1964 with a landslide; under Truman in 1948, the Democratic Party coalition created by Franklin Roosevelt disintegrated. Truman was an underdog, all right, but because his own party broke down, not because the Republican opposition was powerful.

Zachary Karabell argues that Thomas E. Dewey, above, was the wave of the future in U.S. politics.

In the 1948 election, the Republican ticket headed by New York Gov. Thomas E. Dewey faced the remnants of the Roosevelt alliance, which had split into three factions. On the left was the Progressive Party, whose presidential candidate, Henry A. Wallace, had preceded Truman as vice president to Franklin Roosevelt. On the right was the segregationist States' Rights Party, which broke with the mainstream Democrats over civil rights reform and nominated Strom Thurmond. Harry Truman was the candidate of a rump Democratic Party deserted by the radical left and vilified by the radical right.

Truman and his allies, finding themselves at war on three fronts, proved to be ruthless fighters. Wallace, an old-fashioned prairie Progressive with illusions about the Soviet Union, allowed Communist Party members to infiltrate his campaign at high levels. Karabell's claim that "Some American Communists were dedicated to the Soviet Union, but others were simply American radicals" is unconvincing; recently declassified Soviet archives have revealed that both the hierarchy and membership of the CPUSA slavishly followed the party line set down by Moscow for fear of expulsion.

The denunciation of Wallace's pro-Soviet, Communist-dominated Progressive Party by anti-communist liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger appears to have been justified. In discussing Strom Thurmond's "Dixiecrats," Karabell is also generous to a fault. Karabell writes that "Thurmond . . . distanced himself from the idea of white supremacy." But the sole raison d'etre of the States' Rights Party was the preservation of apartheid in the South. The Southern Democrats who denounced proposed federal civil rights legislation as tyrannical had long supported federal programs that helped white Southerners.

The fact that the alternatives to the Democrats and Republicans in 1948 were apologists for Stalin or die-hard defenders of white supremacy tends to undermine Karabell's argument for the desirability of a multiparty system in the United States. That is a pity, because Karabell is right on this subject. "The notion that third parties imperil the stability of American democracy was

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